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### Virtual Lessons, Victorious Students: Online Education & Artistic Expression for Refugee Families

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# Virtual Lessons, Victorious Students: Online Education & Artistic Expression for Refugee Families

Brett Iarrobino '21 - LEEP Fellows Scholar (Sponsor: Professor Jie Park)



## Teaching Format & Responsibilities

WRAP's Education Coordinator developed a robust system for conducting online lessons utilizing an ESL learning platform and database. I met weekly with a family of five over Zoom, and occasionally in-person, when outdoor weather permitted, working through level-appropriate picture books and basic math skills. By June 2020, WRAP students had been out of an in-person learning environment for nearly four months; it was imperative to this program and our organization to provide them with structured learning opportunities that foster increased familiarity and comprehension with the English language.



Fig. 5: WRAP families and staff gather at the December 2019 Holiday Party, three months before the office's closure.

## About the Worcester Refugee Assistance Project

Founded in 2005, the Worcester Refugee Assistance Project (or WRAP) is a nonprofit that aims to uplift the Burmese refugee population living in the city, providing them with accessible educational and social services. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, WRAP has moved to almost exclusively online operations, working to accomplish the mission to support the Burmese community in a virtual capacity.

Thanks to funding from the 2020 LEEP Fellows Program, I was able to serve as a virtual ESL instructor with the Worcester Refugee Assistance Project, teaching English as a second language to Burmese refugee children, while working to support Burmese refugee families and gaining hands-on experience in the nonprofit educational sector throughout the summer. My presentation's title speaks to the imperative nature of these educational endeavors, furthering refugee populations' practice and familiarity with English amid an unprecedented period of social isolation and tumult.



Fig. 1: A typical summer Zoom call at WRAP, featuring multiple families and students participating.

## A Community Striving for Connectivity

WRAP's refugee community and infrastructure has existed long before this teaching fellowship - it is a collective that is always finding ways to bring families and peers together, even amidst the pandemic. Weekly evenings of virtual bingo, spearheaded by WRAP's Executive Director, were the hallmarks of this community mindset, and served as spirited gatherings for online camaraderie (and a little bit of chaos, as well).

Programming Week	Dates	Run By	Activity	Age Group	Time	Zoom ID & Password
1	May 4-10	Propp & Phoebe	Tik Tok Video Sharing	12+	Saturday May 9th 6pm	
2	May 11-17					
3	May 18-24					
4	May 25-31	Lesia and Mackenzie	BINGO	all ages	Thursday May 28th 7pm	Join Zoom Meeting Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>
5	June 1-7	Propp & Phoebe	Graduation Ceremony	all ages	Thursday June 4th 7pm	Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>
6	June 8-14	Elana	Book Reading & Activity "Thunder Boy Jr."	all ages	Thursday June 11 7:00 PM	Join Zoom Meeting Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>
7	June 15-21	Jillian	Tower Hill Botanical Garden	Children's group	Saturday June 13th 10am-11pm	Join Zoom Meeting Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>
8	June 22-28	Lesia and Mackenzie	BINGO	all ages	Thursday June 18th 7pm	Join Zoom Meeting Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>
9	June 29-July 5	Maddie and Adam	Children's Group	Children's group	Saturday June 27th 10 am	Join Zoom Meeting Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>
10	July 6-12		TIF about COVID	youth	Thursday July 2	Join Zoom Meeting Link: <a href="https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0">https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87624420007?pwd=QVNEbGpScVhZlRlc0p0aUJkZ2Z0</a>

Fig. 4: A screenshot of weekly group programming ideas and projects, facilitated by staff members and volunteers at WRAP.



Fig. 2: Worcester's Cristoforo Colombo Park served as the occasional rendezvous point for socially-distant, in-person lessons with families.

## Teaching ESL: Hands-On in a Virtual World

As an aspiring educator, I was challenged this summer with the unique demands and expectations of facilitating lessons virtually, over Zoom, for the safety of everyone involved. I was forced to adapt my pedagogies and approaches in the classroom to fit a digital format, and constantly adapt to the relentless challenges wrought by poor Internet connections and distracting home environments.



Fig. 3: One of many Reading A-Z children's books used by volunteer instructors. Online PDFs were made available for download to WRAP students and educators, and read together via screen-sharing technology.